

Space, Time, Being, and Estrangement

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Introduction

Estrangement is arguably one of the most important themes of our time. It has been linked to self-knowledge, autobiography, science fiction, Existentialism, historical consciousness, postmodernism, and postcolonial disorders, among other things.¹ In relation to the work of Martin Heidegger, estrangement has been linked to language, truth and poetry,² nihilism,³ and oppression.⁴ However, there is relatively little research on the relation between estrangement and ‘fantasy’. Moreover, there are very few studies of Heidegger’s understanding of estrangement and its relevance to fantasy as a genre, just as there is relatively little research on the relevance of both to scientific-materialist discourses concerning being, nature, value, and meaning. It will be argued here that Heidegger’s work on estrangement, though questionable in some respects, is nevertheless important in relation to ‘fantasy’ and that ‘fantasy’, when understood in the context of this relation, allows one to articulate a critique of scientific-materialist discourses.

For the purposes of this argument, ‘fantasy’ will be understood as a genre which is concerned with the fantastic, the extraordinary or the marvellous, or as Anne Swinfen would have it, with the dimension of the *immaterial* (that is, in the sense of ‘non-material’) and things that, in her words, “cannot exist in the world of empirical experience”.⁵ ‘Fantasy’, one

¹ See, for example, Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001); Peter A. Dorsey, *Sacred Estrangement* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); E.G. Parrinder, *Learning from Other Worlds* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000); David Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Anthony Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996); Mary-Jo Del Vecchio Good (ed.), *Postcolonial Disorders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

² Gerald L. Bruns, *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989).

³ Arthur Kroker, *The Will to Technology and the Culture of Nihilism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

⁴ John McCumber, *Metaphysics and Oppression: Heidegger’s Challenge to Western Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵ Anne Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 5.

might say, explores the irrational but also the a-rational dimensions of being. It is notable that Swinfen links the genre to a broad critique of a world view governed by “materialism” and “rationalism”.⁶ ‘Scientific-materialist’ discourses will be understood in terms of an affirmation of ‘science’, in particular the affirmation of observation, the observable and theory formation, especially in the context of the physical or human sciences, as a means of explaining not just observed particulars but also ‘reality’ or ‘life’ (in some broad sense) as well as the universe, nature, being, purpose, value, and other such things.

One of the most remarkable phenomena of our time – one might say, one of the most striking bifurcations in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century thought and culture – is the recent upsurge of works of ‘fantasy’ on the one hand, and on the other hand, of broadly scientific-materialist discourses on theism, atheism, life, the universe, and so on. The fact that these two upsurges have been more or less *contemporaneous* is also quite notable. And numerous questions arise: to what extent are those discourses adequate to the task of explaining ‘life’, ‘reality’, the universe or being, and other such things? What is the connection between ‘science’ and the marvellous or the fantastic or even the non-material? What is the relationship between these two upsurges, if any? And what does the upsurge in ‘fantasy’ reveal about the question of the relation between us and the realm of the ordinary opened up by Heidegger, or indeed in relation to primordial things in general, or in relation to being, or “the call” to questioning or thinking.⁷ Of course, it is hardly possible to answer all of these questions here and now, but it is possible to begin to answer some of them.

One need only think of the recent upsurge in interest in works of fantasy, on the one hand (for example, Peter Jackson’s interpretations of the *Lord of the Rings* and their global reception, the renewed global interest in the Narnia and Harry Potter narratives and films, and so on) and on the other hand, the upsurge of broadly scientific-materialist accounts of ‘life’, the universe, its origins, meaning, purpose and/or value, for example, in recent work by Richard Dawkins, Steven Weinberg, Michel Onfray, and numerous others. Dawkins, for example in *The God Delusion*, writes of biology and more broadly, of ‘science’, as a privileged source of explanation in relation to an understanding of life as a whole, though it is not entirely clear what ‘life’ actually means in such contexts, or what the relationship is between the empirical study of particular living things in terms of material processes and ‘life’ as it applies to the universe as a whole.

⁶ Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy*, p. 2.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 242.

What is clear is that ‘science’ in such works is seen as the key to understanding ‘life’ or the universe, or at least, to the provision of a theory that will make ‘life’ as a whole or the universe intelligible. Similarly, Steven Weinberg believes that the more we learn about the universe through physical science in particular, the more pointless it seems to be!⁸ Once again, it is not clear in what sense the universe as a whole can be ‘pointless’ or otherwise in the light of inquiry into a very small number of its parts through physical science. Nor for that matter is it clear what he means by pointlessness: to say that something is *pointless* is to say a number of things, for example, that it lacks significance; that it lacks a purpose; that it lacks an end; that it lacks a meaningful goal; that it lacks a point (whatever that might mean); and so on. It is also not clear how this sense of an increasing awareness of ‘pointlessness’, if that is what he means, can be justified by the recent discoveries of modern physics. Indeed, given that much of the universe remains hidden from observation, or remains unobserved, Weinberg’s view could be seen as somewhat presumptuous.

Tolkien’s “Secondary World”

Tolkien’s work on the “Secondary World” is pertinent in this discussion not only of ‘science’ and ‘life’, but also of estrangement and ‘fantasy’. He believed that this “Secondary World” does not “destroy” or “insult” reason; it does not “either blunt the appetite for nor obscure the perception of scientific verity”.⁹ He added: the “keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence) then Fantasy would languish till they were cured”.¹⁰ These are important points: ‘fantasy’, in this reading, is not necessarily devoid of clear reasons or even clear reasoning; some grasp of the truth, perhaps in the sense of how things are in the world, and some grasp of knowledge, for example about the natural world and its interconnections, are important if ‘fantasy’ is to appeal to us as truth-seekers or as knowledgeable readers, viewers and thinkers. He argued, however, that “creative fantasy” is not a “slave” to the “recognition of fact” but is *founded upon it*.¹¹ He meant, presumably, that the ability to recognise fact underpins, or inspires, the emergence of a work of creative fantasy. It is not difficult to see the point: for example, many readers of the *Harry Potter* series can grasp the relationship between Harry’s (fictional) family and the fact of social inequality in England

⁸ Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes* (London: Deutsch, 1977).

⁹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 50.

¹⁰ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 50.

¹¹ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 50.

(or elsewhere), just as they can see how actual social inequality can provide a meaningful foundation for an interpretation of Harry as a character who values and instantiates a kind of creative and symbolic freedom on a number of levels.

Tolkien also wrote of ‘fantasy’ as an *evangelium*, in which one could grasp a kind of joy, “beyond the walls of the world”,¹² “that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through”.¹³ It is not that fantasy is devoid of fact, necessarily; rather that it resists the *domination* of “observed ‘fact’”, an important distinction that should not be forgotten.¹⁴ He believed that the genre provides “images of things... not to be found in our primary world at all or are generally believed not to be found there”.¹⁵ This point coheres well with Swinfen’s emphasis, mentioned earlier, on the *immaterial*.

Clearly, Tolkien’s work in this context is important in light of the question of how things are, or how things stand, and in particular in relation to insightful works of ‘fantasy’ which are not devoid, necessarily, of facts or knowledge. Given that we do arguably have an upsurge now in works that seem to affirm the domination of observed fact or of knowledge based on observation, Tolkien’s work would seem to provide a thought-provoking counterpoint, and opens a path to a possible critique of scientific-materialist discourses and what they tell us about ‘life’, the world, the universe, cosmic purpose or pointlessness and so on, precisely because it highlights a domination that may itself be unjustified; a sense of things that may be quite real but which are not accessible to observation or intelligible within known laws of nature; a sense in which knowledge of some things may not be adequate to an understanding of the whole.

Heidegger on ‘Truth’

Heidegger’s work is also significant in this respect, particularly in relation to his reflections on the ‘nature of things’. He wrote: for “a long time we have been accustomed to characterize [sic] the question of what something is as a question about its nature”.¹⁶ He seems to mean that ‘we’, working in the context of “Western philosophy” (especially ontology), have become used to a way of thinking according to which the key to understanding what something is, lies in grasping its ‘nature’. It is as if this way of thinking has become

¹² Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 60.

¹³ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 61.

¹⁴ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 61.

¹⁵ Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 44.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1958), p. 43.

customary, one might say, or ingrained, or even unreflective. Heidegger saw this as a kind of estrangement from other fundamentally important ways of thinking that derive (also) from the ancient Greeks:

[The] question about the nature of something awakens at those times when that, whose nature is being questioned, has become *obscure and confused* [*verdunkelt und verwirrt*], when at the same time the relationship of men to what is being questioned has become uncertain or has even been *shattered*" [*erschüttert*]"¹⁷

This is a rich passage that deserves close, detailed scrutiny but which is outside the immediate scope of this paper. However, what one can say here is this: according to Heidegger, to inquire into the ‘nature’ of something, while presupposing that that is the key to a true understanding of it, is a manifestation not of sound methodology but of confusion; what is confused, fundamentally, is the question of origin or ground on the one hand, and the question of the nature of something, on the other hand. What becomes obscured or confused is the question of the primordial relation of the thing to its ground; the search for the nature of something is a kind of manifestation of confusion and obscurity. In a sense, one is estranged from the question of the primordial relation, or of the ground, which is why the question of the nature of something ‘awakens’ again.

More broadly, Heidegger argued that this kind of problem emerges when *at the same time* our relationship to things (whose nature is sought in questioning) has become uncertain or severed. In other words, Heidegger was pointing to a kind of estrangement on two levels: first, from what things really are (and questions about the nature of such things become the very manifestation of a state of confusion or obscurity); and second, from a relationship, perhaps primordial, between us and the things that ‘we’ ask such questions about, especially if, Heidegger added, the nature of a thing “might then define for ‘us’ the whole of the thing... or... might lead us to presuppose that its ‘essence’ lies in its nature”.¹⁸ Such a view amounts to a catastrophic error, according to Heidegger.

Of the ‘essence’, he wrote: the “essence of man can never be proven scientifically... [that] what is essential always remains unprovable, or more precisely, lies outside the sphere of provability or unprovability”.¹⁹ Although his understanding of the ‘essence’ is not always clear, he believed it to be what endures in us. He offered another clue: he argued that the question of the

¹⁷ Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 43, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 43.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 56.

nature of something is often cast as a *scientific* one; but he asked why the *nature* of a human being should explain the *essence* of such a being. This is a good question. It does not follow, necessarily, that if one has explained the ‘nature’ of something, that one has also explained its ‘essence’ (if the latter is defined as that which endures in us, for example); nor is it evident or obvious that the “nature” of something is identical to its ‘essence’. In this context, Heidegger would seem to be correct, especially if the ‘essence’ is, as he believed, outside the “sphere of provability or unprovability”.²⁰ One might say (though Heidegger did not say this), that the ‘nature’ of something is often, if not always, cast as a ‘scientific’ question, that is to say a biological or physical question for example, and the ‘essence’ is often, if not always, cast as a trans-physical question (rather than a *metaphysical* question, in this case, for Heidegger voiced well-known objections to aspects of ‘Western’ metaphysics and ontology).

In any case, Heidegger went on to argue that “the essence of unhiddenness is deconcealment” [*Entbergung*];²¹ through it, in it, the unhiddenness of beings occurs. That is, *unhiddenness* is not achieved through questions about the ‘nature’ of something, but through the question of how being is *deconcealed*. This is of great importance in relation to ‘fantasy’: just as Being, in Heidegger’s words, “inclines intrinsically to self-concealment”,²² one might say that ‘fantasy’ as a genre opens up the sphere of deconcealment, in which what is essential in us unfolds (for example, freedom, courage, epiphany, virtue, fellowship and love, and so on, in *The Lord of the Rings*). So, the *essence* is what endures in beings and is not reducible to their ‘nature’, and *deconcealment* is the revelation of what endures in beings; namely the relation to *their ground*. Heidegger’s argument coheres, though some questions arise (which are outside the scope of this paper), as noted earlier, about the ‘essence’ as well as the questioning that it “calls” from us (as Heidegger would have it).

So, ‘truth’ in this context is not a matter of observing or discovering empirically or in materialist terms, the ‘nature’ of things. It is, rather, in Heidegger’s words, “the innermost accomplishment of liberation”,²³ that is, not of human beings but of the relation that pertains between the thing and the *ground*, which Heidegger called a *presencing* in ‘us’. In this sense, ‘we’, who manifest confusion in our asking of the question concerning the ‘nature’ of a thing or the ‘nature’ of things, and who at the same time ‘shatter’, to use

²⁰ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, p. 56.

²¹ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, p. 56.

²² Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 114.

²³ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, p. 53.

Heidegger's metaphor, the relation between the ground and that thing or those things whose 'nature' we seek to know, 'awaken', to use another of his metaphors, the question of the 'essence' which endures in us; which lies outside the sphere of the provable or unprovable; and which concerns the *deconcealment* of being as the ground in that very thing or those very things. It is through *deconcealment*, Heidegger argued, that what is enduring and relates things to their ground through *presencing*, is revealed.

What, then, did Heidegger mean by 'truth'? He did not believe that truth is a matter of propositions, or justified, or justifiable, beliefs. He believed that one stands, so to speak, 'in truth'. This is a little ambiguous. But what Heidegger meant was this, and it needs to be put in somewhat poetic terms (in order to remain faithful to his writing and its meaning): those who orient themselves towards the 'essence', or towards that which endures in us, turn towards that *unhiddenness* (which he believed, anchors things in their ground), and find the event of *deconcealment* (which he believed is the manifestation of *unhiddenness*), are 'in truth'. In his own words: "only if, and only in so far as, [they] hold [themselves] within the unhiddenness of beings" and comport themselves "to this unhiddenness" (which is anchored in the ground of Being) [do they] "find the ground" of [their] "*Dasein* in that event of deconcealment which constitutes the unhiddenness of beings".²⁴

Estrangement, Freedom, and Fantasy

In summary then, if Heidegger is correct with regard to estrangement, the privileging of scientific-materialist paradigms into the *nature of things* obscures, confuses, and shatters the relation to the fundamental question of the ground (and the related question of the 'deconcealment' in beings). 'We' become estranged from the question of the ground of being and from the ground of being itself; and the question of our relation to that ground becomes confused, uncertain, and obscure. What is an appropriate response to this kind of analysis? Well, it takes (at least) two forms in contemporary thought and culture.

Heidegger and Tolkien, who were almost exact contemporaries, articulated related concerns and projects that pose interesting questions in terms of the upsurge of scientific materialist discourses concerning life, the world and being, and so on. Heidegger emphasised at least three kinds of estrangement (from the ground of Being, from the question of the ground and from the question of the essence of freedom) in an extended critique of a kind of understanding of the human in relation to the categories of what he called

²⁴ Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, p. 55.

the *techno-scientific* paradigm; in relation to the emergence of nihilism in 20th century culture; and in relation to an essential task, namely the *overcoming* (*Überwindung*) of traditional, scientific-materialist ontologies.

Tolkien, in the domain of fiction and in his commentaries, affirmed a “Secondary World” which, by contrast, highlights the sense in which one can go beyond the perception of science’s verities (though he did not make clear what he took those ‘verities’ to be); beyond the bounds of a ‘frame’ of dominant rationalism, for example, in search of ‘images’ that are not apparent within that ‘frame’ (or are thought not to be found or to belong there); and in which estrangement from kin, community, ground, ‘nature’, ‘world’, being and so on can be overcome on imaginative, figurative and symbolic planes within a genre such as fantasy.

Just as Tolkien affirmed and articulated the “Secondary World” to highlight the extent to which freedom can be realised – one of that ‘World’s’ fundamental affirmations – so Heidegger affirmed the liberation that may follow from reflection on the originary; “we think toward the ground of everything”,²⁵ so that the “truth that determines us and has perhaps long since become unrecognizable”, especially in the light of the upsurge of scientific-materialist discourses, does not vanish from view.²⁶ In further studies, one might look fruitfully at the meaning and significance of liberation and freedom in their work; at the connections between the kind of liberation that Tolkien found in ‘fantasy’ as it relates to ‘science’, materialism or a dominant rationalism, and the kind of liberation that Heidegger located in thinking that is attuned to the originary; to an orientation towards the “essence”; and to the event of *deconcealment*. Further and more detailed studies of the relationship between the critique (implicit as well as explicit) of dominant materialist views of life or the universe in Tolkien’s fantasies and reflections, and of Heidegger’s broad critique of the dominance of ‘techno-scientific’ thinking and its connection to nascent materialism and nihilism in contemporary thought and culture, would conceivably reap some significant rewards.

Conclusion

If these commentaries and reflections are sound, it is not too much to say that Heidegger’s works offer much of value in relation not just to an understanding of estrangement but also to “fantasy”. What is *unthought* and even *uncomprehended*, as Heidegger would have it,²⁷ in the sciences, and more

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 2.

²⁶ Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, p. 17.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy and The Task of Thinking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 59.

broadly in scientific-materialist discourses, can be opened up in philosophy or in poetics – in a *destruktion* of ontology or in a genre which opens up a reflective space of and for originary questions: of and for beings and their ground; of and for the things that endure in ‘us’ (if any); of and for “ground-concepts” and the experience of freedom²⁸; of and for “remaining within the transmission” of something primordial and affirming that “attunement”, whether in works of fiction or of ontology or philosophy; and of and for, in Heidegger’s words, “bearing witness to the dwelling in what is transmitted”.²⁹

In the works of Heidegger *and* Tolkien, by extension, the histories of being, and of beings, are not the histories of *human* being; in the works of both, humanity is *drawn into* these histories,³⁰ and these narratives and accounts affirm various levels and kinds of *deconcealment* and *unhiddenness*, for example in the symbolic form of the “Secondary World” or in the form of originary, and somewhat poetized, thinking. Though there are, no doubt, many stories of confusion, obscurity, decline, and estrangement, we are brought back in the work of both to the experience of reflection, in the words of Heidegger, *as a relation to being* and to consequent possibilities of freedom on symbolic (metaphorical) and literal planes.³¹

Heidegger believed that “no transformation comes without an anticipatory escort. But how does an escort draw near unless Appropriation opens out. Which, calling, needing, envisions human being, that is, sees and in that seeing brings mortals to the path of thinking, poetizing building”.³² It is possible to suggest that ‘fantasy’, on one level, attests to this kind of ‘appropriation’, that is to say, to an opening for thinking that may well take us beyond what Tolkien regarded as the dominance of scientific-materialist thinking about life or the world. Their purpose(s), point(s) or pointlessness (in some sense) ‘brings mortals’ often, if not always, to questions, events, and experiences of an originary or primordial, ‘poetized’ kind; that is to say, in Heidegger’s terms, to a ‘clearing’ where paths of thinking (in ‘poetized structures’ or symbolic structures, for example) lead beyond *human* being and the question of ‘its’ ‘nature’, and beyond estrangement on numerous levels.

²⁸ Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, p. 76.

²⁹ Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, p. 78.

³⁰ Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, p. 82.

³¹ Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, p. 97.

³² Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, p. 110.